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SUBJECT: CIVILIAN RESERVES: DEFENDING THE REVOLUTION

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

11. (C) Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez has begun organizing civilian units to defend the country from potential invasions. The GOV has not made clear the relationship between military reserves and civilian militias, but Chavez announced that Maj. Gen. Julio Quintero Viloria would emerge from retirement to lead the reserves. The civilian units are to answer to the President. Building up the reserves and adding civilian units to Venezuela's defense structure are works in progress dependent on the President himself. Although some Chavez opponents believe the country's military may not be pleased with the development, the institution has been subjected to significant changes under Chavez and the old paradigms may not apply. End summary.

12. (U) Venezuelan civilian militias have begun to organize in response to President Hugo Chavez's February 4 announcement of the formation of popular defense units (UDPs). The groups wear civilian clothing with military patches and drill without weapons, according to press. During drills, volunteers receive payment (rumored to be about US \$25 per month) and a meal. Rafael Cabrices, a civilian who fired into a crowd of demonstrators during the April 2002 coup, is one of the leaders of a suburban Caracas UDP. Cabrices told a reporter his group of about 120 people was formed to wage guerrilla warfare in the event of a US invasion.

Who's in Charge

13. (C) GOV officials have issued contradictory statements about how the civilian and military reserves will relate to each other, and who will lead each force. The National Assembly's defense committee announced that the new armed forces organic law--to be discussed by the full assembly in April--would remove military reserves from Ministry of Defense auspices and make them answerable to Chavez and the state governments, according to press reports. During his March 20 "Alo Presidente" broadcast, Chavez called up Maj. Gen. Julio Quintero Viloria, the former Armed Forces Joint Command chief who retired March 4, to lead the reserves and report directly to the President. Although Chavez referred principally to military reserves, he noted that military reserves and popular mobilization "go together like hydrogen and oxygen in water." DAO contacts described the two forces as separate institutions, reporting that Gen. Quintero would take command of the military reserves and that Chavez would oversee the UDPs. National Security and Defense Council secretary Maj. Gen. Melvin Lopez Hidalgo described a

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different command structure; specifying that the military reserves would remain under its current leadership, and Quintero would assist Chavez in coordinating a "popular" reserve force.

Who Can Bear Arms?

13. (U) Statements from GOV officials and supporters have also been unclear about how such civilian militias are to be armed. Discussing reserve recruitment in February, Chavez indicated the GOV would seek citizens with skills in armed combat (REFTEL). Gen. Lopez predicted that in less than a year, one million people would be trained in asymmetrical warfare, but they would only be allowed weapons during training or an actual invasion. Interior Minister Jesse Chacon cautioned that the UDPs would not be allowed arms, and any members who carried them would be prosecuted, according

to March 17 press reports. Cabrices argued that armed UDPs should be autonomous from the military so that they would be insulated from any military uprising. "If the military knows ... what weapons we have, ... they will shoot us like ducks in a pond," he warned.

Neighborhood Big Brother

14. (C) Chavez loyalists are also seeking to employ civilians to inform on potential threats to the revolution. According to press reports, greater Caracas mayor Juan Barreto promoted in early March the organization of an intelligence network of taxi drivers to inform on rich opposition members. Ideologue for the new civilian militias Vice Foreign Affairs Minister Lt. Col. (retired) William Izarra has proposed that some members of civilian units be charged with intelligence collection. The GOV may have already begun to form such groups; a neighborhood street sweeper told a US Embassy officer that he was receiving monthly 300,000 bolivares (over USD 150--a significant bonus for a manual laborer) to report on locals driving expensive vehicles.

Opposition Reaction

15. (C) Chavez opponents have criticized the creation of civilian units. Accion Democratica president Jesus Mendez Quijada objected that the new doctrine encourages the formation of parallel armed groups. Former Defense Minister Fernando Ochoa Antich lamented that Chavez's personal command of the new units would destroy the military's "institutional sense," according to press reports. Retired general-grade officers told poloff March 17 that morale was waning in the armed forces because soldiers viewed armed civilian groups as undermining the military's prominence as the only institution charged with national defense. One retired general wrote in an electronically circulated essay that the new doctrine would allow for greater partisan control over the political opposition. Another opined that Chavez was creating a parallel force because he did not trust his own armed forces.

Comment

16. (C) Like the development of a new doctrine for the Venezuelan military, the beefing up of reserve forces and the establishment of a separate militia under President Chavez's control are a work in progress. Contradictory or incomplete information about them will be the norm as GOV officials often have difficulty staying on message when it is largely Chavez who is masterminding the process. It is difficult for us to gauge how the expansion of militias is affecting military morale. Although some officers have resented the promotion of officers on the basis of loyalty rather than competence, such bitterness is mostly limited to the dwindling ranks of officers politically opposed to Chavez. The question now is the degree to which this apparent usurpation of a military's principal role will be tolerated by an institution that has been undergoing a significant transformation already.

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